Rang De Basanti (रंग दे बसंती, 2006)

Bhaskar Sarkar

dir. Rakeysh O. Mehra; prod. Rakeysh O. Mehra, Ronnie Screwvala; screenplay Renzil D'Silva, Prasoon Joshi, Rakeysh O. Mehra; photography Binod Pradhan; music A. R. Rahman. 35mm, color, 167 mins. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra Productions, distrib. UTV Motion Pictures.

Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* is one of a select number of critical and box office hits that have helped consolidate the transformation of Bombay cinema into the global cultural industry of Bollywood. Adopting the »ensemble buddy film« structure featured in contemporary megahits such as *Dil Chahta Hai* (2000), *3 Idiots* (2009), and *Kai Po Che!* (2013), *RDB* develops into a powerful political melodrama. What distinguishes *RDB* from most other youth-oriented ensemble narratives is its focus on patriotism, understood as love of and devotion to one's country, nation, or political community. Beginning with a rather naturalized sense of patriotism as an instinctual attribute tied to blood and soil, the film explores such blind commitment as the condition for the emergence of a populist, anti-corruption political agency. Mediality takes center stage in this affective exploration, with mass communication technology (radio and television) emerging as a crucial node of political mobilization. In the end, patriotism turns out to be a thoroughly mediated sentiment.

The story begins when Sue McKinley (played by Alice Patten), a young British filmmaker, arrives in Delhi to shoot a documentary about Indian freedom fighters of the 1920s: patriots such as Bhagat Singh and Chandrasekhar Azad, who gave their lives in fighting the British Raj. Sue's interest in this history stems from reading her grandfather's diaries. In spite of being a colonial administrator, James McKinley (Steven Mackintosh) was profoundly moved by the revolutionaries' courage in the face of death. Lacking institutional backing, Sue enlists the support of her friend Sonia (Soha Ali Khan). Soon, Sonia's circle of friends—Karan (Siddharth), Sukhi (Sharman Joshi), Aslam (Kunal Kapoor), and the irrepressible Daljeet aka DJ (Aamir Khan)—are all cast

as legendary martyrs in the film. At first, the happy-go-lucky college students find the characters' unguarded commitments to the country out of sync with their own experiences and values. But in the course of filming, the youthful slackers overcome their discomfort with the script and begin to discover their »inner patriots.«

This particular arc of self-realization emerges out of a South Asian conjuncture shaped by two contemporaneous, seemingly contradictory movements: globalization and the rise of fundamentalist religious nationalism. The launch of India's economic liberalization in 1991, followed by the state's formal recognition of the media industry in 1998, ushered in foreign capital and led to streamlining Indian cinema in accordance with global norms. *RDB*'s incorporation of a British perspective and the involvement of international personnel, including two high profile British executive producers, index some of the material-semiotic shifts in a creative industry looking for transnational collaborations and audiences. The film, which was India's submission for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2007 Oscars, is exemplary of Bollywood's concerted global gesture during this period. However, while globalization is widely thought to transcend the nation, the ensuing sociocultural transformations also elicited strong puritanical responses, often coalescing around a set of civilizational values based on *hindutva*, the concept of an essential »Hinduness.« In the film, Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni)—the idealistic Hindu nationalist RSS cadet, whose band of vigilantes aggressively censors fellow students for their deracinating and »western« attitudes and styles—is representative of this conservative tendency. The entanglements of these two trends, inducing mutual reconfigurations of the national and the global, drive many Bollywood films of the 1990s and 2000s.

Rang De Basanti negotiates such convulsions by returning us to the question of patriotism's relevance in the age of the transnational. The *mise-en-abyme* plot jumps between two temporalities: the sepia-toned footage shot by Sue, based on her grandfather's memoirs, and the present-day narrative in which the amateur student-actors, playing martyr figures in the film-within-the film, find their lives upended by »postmemories« (Hirsch) of selfless sacrifice from the struggle for national liberation. As the past seeps into the actors' present day lives, an uncanny coevality is forged between their nascent political consciousness and the martyrs' patriotic resolve. It is this affective synchronicity, orchestrated in terms of frequent intercuts and dissolves, that shapes a narrative of recursive coincidences. The dynamic is particularly apparent in the »male melodrama« subplot involving Aslam, a Muslim student, and the Hindu chauvinist Laxman, who play Ashfaqulla Khan (a Muslim Pathan) and Ramprasad Bismil (a Brahmin), respectively, in the nested historical narrative. While both students are from working class backgrounds, they overcome the communal rancor because of their shared appreciation of Khan and Bismil's devotion to the country. In the final sequence of *RDB*, Aslam and Laxman end up in a powerful tableau of joint sacrifice, echoing the martyrdom of the two historical characters whom they play, not to mention the iconography of 1950s patriotic Indian films preaching communal harmony (Sarkar).

In presenting the gradual kindling of an innate, if latent, patriotism in its youthful protagonists, *RDB* mobilizes a structuring trope of melodramatic narratives: delay or deferral, opening up the space for negotiation and transformation, and leading up to the eventual fulfillment of expectation. In spite of the initial apathy of the students, and their expressions of alienation and irreverence, audiences familiar with popular Hindi films expect them to step up, become socially engaged, and act on their new convictions.

Halfway through the film, the protagonists are already more contemplative and cognizant because of their immersion in the history of the freedom struggle—but they still need a catalytic event to launch them on a course of purposive action. This comes when Indian Air Force pilot Ajay Rathod (Madhavan), Sonia's fiancé, is killed in a flight accident. They receive the news from the television set at the tea stall, their favorite hangout, soon after they have seen stirring prints from Sue's film-in-progress. While their familiar lifeworld shatters, asynchronous moments get pulled into epiphanic coherence.

Even though there had been over a hundred accidents involving similar MiG-21 aircrafts, and in spite of reports that Ajay valiantly flew his malfunctioning vessel clear of a densely populated city, the minister of defense publicly blames the deceased pilot for rash flying. Here, the narrative takes a topical turn, reviving memories of multiple graft controversies—most notably the late 1980s Bofors arms deal scandal involving the highest levels of government. When the police brutally attack a peaceful candlelight vigil at Delhi's India Gate, Ajay's grieving mother is seriously injured and put into a coma. Already a war widow, Mrs. Rathod (Waheeda Rehman) has now lost her son to state corruption. When she asks for redress, her life is imperiled. Played by an iconic star of 1960s Bombay cinema, Mrs. Rathod here invokes Mother India, a potent nationalist archetype consolidated across the 20th century by a range of cultural productions. Within the diegetic world of *Rang De Basanti*, this attack on civil society—as well as the iconicity of a Mother India figure fighting for her life—revives memories of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, in which British soldiers killed over 380 peaceful protestors and injured 1,200. For Aslam, DJ, Karan, Laxman, Sonia, and Suki, having just acted in Sue's film as freedom fighters who gave their lives to fight against colonial violence, the assault of the contemporary Indian state on its own citizens seems no less atrocious. Once again, the nation—Mother India—is under attack: this time by the corrupt, power-mongering members of its own ruling bloc. Inspired by their aliases, the friends decide to take action against the repressive state on behalf of the wronged national community.

The politicization of the friends' group and their subsequent actions take distinctly mediatic forms. The *mis-en-abyme* narrative is producer-director Mehra's stratagem to revivify seemingly archaic sentiments associated with patriotism, which today's youth cannot relate to, by framing them in the context of postcolonial malfeasance (Mehra). DJ and his friends shoot down Minister of Defense Shastri, echoing the scene in the film-within-the-film that depicts Bhagat Singh and his compatriots' assassination of a British officer known for his draconian actions against Indian nationalists. Interestingly, Sue McKinley, who catalyzes the rekindling of patriotic fervor, now takes a back seat in the narrative. This is not so much about a gendered positionality against violence—after all, it is Sonia who unequivocally pronounces the minister's death sentence—as it is a matter of showcasing the emergence of local grassroots political agency. Sue's reduction to a lovelorn heroine (her worries are focalized onto DJ, her romantic interest) may also have to do with the narrative's shift away from the values and institutions of civil society. In societies of the global South (understood as an irregular, historically constituted geography of dispossession), especially in the face of flagrant state violence, »civil society« may seem more like a mechanism of containment than a conduit to social justice. However, when the state confers the nation's highest civilian award on the dead minister, eulogizing him as a martyr who gave his life to fight terrorism, the protagonists realize the need to take charge of the emerging media nar-

rative about the MiG-21 incident. With this objective in mind, they take over the Delhi station of the state-run All India Radio (AIR). The political efficacies of civil society's institutions are constantly negotiated: for instance, in the ambivalent on-air exchanges between Karan and the listeners who call in.

The modern political subject is an idealization. How the pre-political »people« gets transformed into the right-bearing citizen-subject remains a mystery. In explaining this black box of political emergence, humanities scholars have focused on the sentimental education of subjects within national life. Lauren Berlant, for instance, speaks of the *national symbolic*, a space where public artefacts and narratives render abstract political values, rights, and institutions emotionally legible to the common masses. One might say that *RDB* engages in the reorientation of the Indian national symbolic for the transnational contemporary moment. If the shared iconicity of a wounded Mother India prompts patriotic intervention in defense of a nation under duress, that intercession extends to patricide—figuratively, against the state, with the defense minister standing in as the locus of betrayal and abuse, and literally against Karan's business tycoon father, for his role in the fraudulent arms deals. Karan's extreme action is divulged on air, in response to a caller's question, right before he and DJ are gunned down by state forces. As if on cue with this supreme sacrifice, Mrs. Rathod awakes from her coma and tears trickle down her cheeks. This narrative denouement invests *RDB* with elements of a family melodrama with no possible happy resolution. But the irresolvable contradiction presents the possibility of a wider mass mobilization. The film concludes with proliferating images of television screens, showing young people from diverse backgrounds across India participating in spirited discussion of the nation's current malaise and its potential futures.

Whether this media-technological invocation of an animated public sphere can translate into concrete engagement, and what forms such patriotic conscription could take, remain open questions. Experiences of right-wing vigilantism in India cast sinister light on the film's populist gestures, even as signs of student mobilization for social justice provide reasons for optimism. *Rang De Basanti* indeed returned patriotism to popular discourse, conjoining anti-colonial struggles with postcolonial political challenges. It also made certain affective-expressive practices, such as candlelight marches, a regular aspect of urban political life in India (Dilip). Writing a decade before the film's release, Arjun Appadurai suggested that certain U.S. pop-cultural modalities were being appropriated in »piecemeal, pragmatic, haphazard, flexible, and opportunistic ways« across the globe to launch »struggles for self-determination.« As part of this tendency, transnational forms of patriotism were being forged by »link[ing] human rights, consumer style, antistatism, and media glitz« (174). *Rang De Basanti* has put a Bollywood twist in this production of »woke« youth cultures, articulating Bombay idioms with global trends to fashion a potent political address.

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